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2.1.1 Applications: EU+ overview

In 2018, there were 664 480 applications for international protection in EU+ countries [103] [104] which amounts to a single application for every 792 inhabitants. [105]

By the end of 2018, the number of applications decreased for the third successive year, but in this case only by 10%. Between 2017 and 2016, the decrease was much more significant at 43 %. This total of applications lodged in the EU+ in 2018 was very similar to the situation back in 2014, when 662 165 applications were lodged. (Figure 1).

Applicants for international protection in the EU+, by type [106]

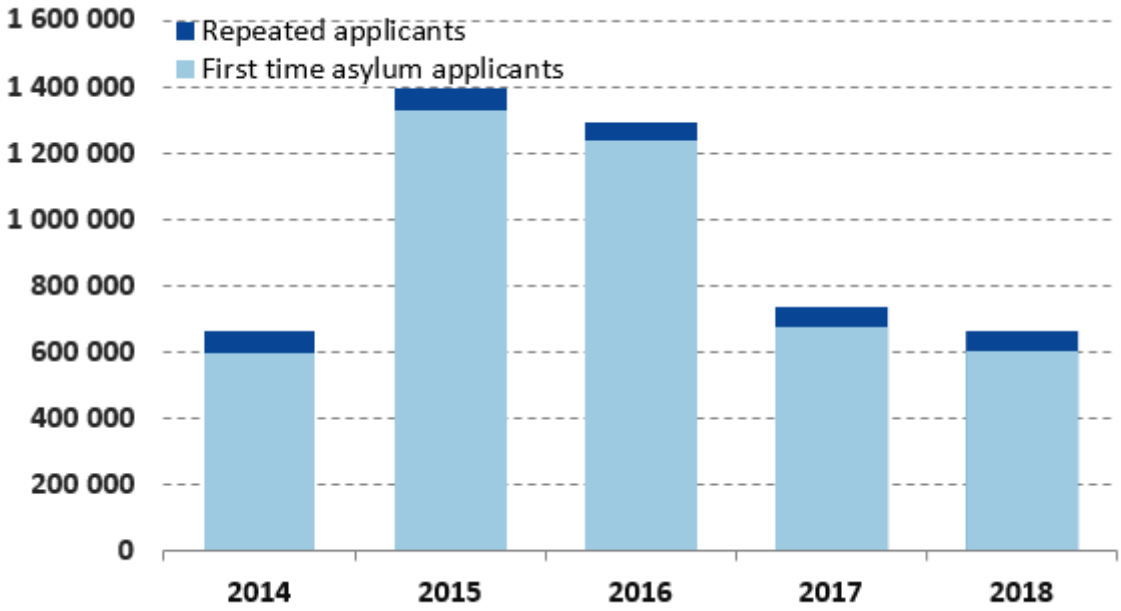


Figure 1: The level of applications lodged returned to the pre-crisis level

In contrast to 2014, the number of applications remained remarkably stable throughout 2018, fluctuating around 55 000 per month (Figure 2). Only in December 2018 did the monthly total go below 50 000 applications, which is likely related to the Christmas break and correspondingly lower processing capacity in national asylum authorities. The highest monthly total was recorded in October, when close to 63 000 applications were lodged. The relative stability at EU+ level however conceals stark variation between Member States and between individual citizenships. (see section 2.1.4)

Migratory pressure at the EU external borders decreased for the third consecutive year. In 2018, detections of illegal border-crossing at the EU's external border fell to just 150 114, compared to 204 750 in 2017 and more than half a million in 2016 (Figure 2). The primary reason for the decrease in 2018 dates back to July 2017, when suddenly numbers of detected irregular migrants at the Central Mediterranean route dropped. An upsurge in detections at the Western Mediterranean route occurred, equalling the number of detections at the Eastern Mediterranean route (some 57 000 each). [107]

Along the Central Mediterranean route in 2018 only 23 485 detections took place, compared to 118 962 in 2017, even if the change in situation was already visible in July of that year. According to Frontex, this is the most significant development at the EU's external borders since the implementation of the EU-Turkey statement in March 2016. In contrast, detections at the Western Mediterranean route more than doubled compared to 2017 and reached 57 000. Most of the irregular migrants detected at this route were from sub-Saharan countries, and also Moroccan nationals were detected more often. Also at the Eastern Mediterranean route, detections increased, but to a smaller scale (+ 34 %). The most significant developments here were the increase in land crossings from Turkey to Greece, and a return programme in Turkey for irregular Syrian migrants, shifting the nationality composition of irregular migrants detected at this route (even though Syrians still were the main nationality).[108]

Applications for international protection vs detections of illegal border crossing

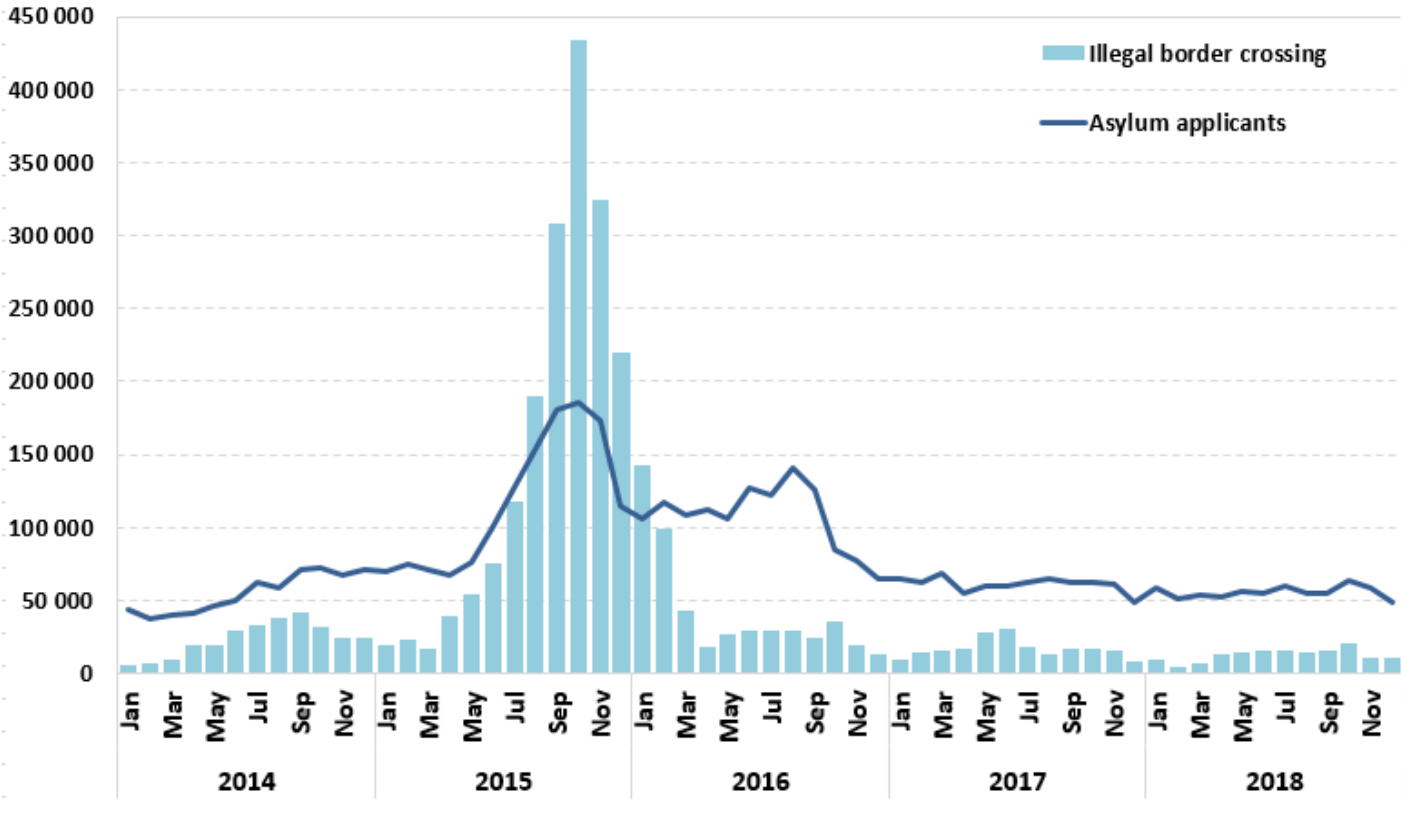


Figure 2: In 2018 there were four times as many applications for asylum than detections of illegal border crossing at the external border

With both detections of illegal border-crossing at the EU external borders and applications lodged in EU+ countries decreasing, there is clearly a substantial gap between the two: throughout 2018 there were consistently more applications for international protection than detections of illegal border-crossing (Figure 2). Potential reasons for this gap may be plentiful, but remain difficult to ascertain with any precisions. For example: some applicants may have irregularly entered the EU undetected; others may have been staying irregularly in the EU for some time, only applying for asylum when intercepted; others still may have entered the EU regularly (with a visa or under a visa-free scheme – the latter some 18 %); and finally, some applicants may have lodged an additional application after being issued a final decision on a previous application in the same or in another EU+ country.

The latter category is repeated applicants. In 2018, a total of approximately 61 600 or 9 % of all applications were repeated applicants. In 2017 this was a similar share (8 %), but in 2016 only 4 % of all applicants had already lodged an application in the same country previously. A relatively higher share of repeated applicants also links back to the decrease in new arrivals to the EU+.

The proportion of repeated applicants versus first-time applicants varied greatly between citizenships. For example, among the 30 main citizenships of applicants, the share of repeated applicants was significantly higher for applicants from Serbia (29 % were repeated applicants) and Russia (23 %), whereas it was visibly low for applicants from Venezuela (1 %), Colombia and Palestine (2 % each). This may to some extent separate citizenships into those that have been applying for asylum in the EU for some time, from those who are newly arriving and seeking international protection.

Repeated applicants are one example of applicants that are, by definition, counted twice in asylum statistics. But it is unlikely for the double count to occur in the same year. Nevertheless, it is useful to be aware that double counting and data gaps are possible weaknesses of the analysis of asylum trends, as it is for analysis of any topic. 109 Quantifying applications may include double countings, some of which are known (e.g. repeated applicants having applied previously in the same EU+ country, or relocated applicants), while others are estimations (e.g. individuals who lodged an application previously in another EU+ country). Conversely, data may also be based upon partial gaps, generally causing an underestimation. Some doubles and gaps in the data can be estimated, while others cannot. However, weaknesses in the data are likely to cancel each other out to some extent, with the result that signals in the analytical space remain strong, repeatable and realistic.

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103 If not stated otherwise EU+ will be understood as EU28 plus Norway, Switzerland, Liechtenstein and Iceland.

104 This figure does not include the number of citizens of EU+ countries who applied for international protection in another EU+ country.

105 The population on 1 January 2018 of the 32 EU+ countries was 526 545 538. Eurostat, Population on 1 January by age and sex.

106 ‘Repeated applicants’ is a Eurostat statistical category, referring to a person who made a further application for international protection, in a given Member State, after a final decision

(positive/negative/discontinuation) has been taken on a previous application. The concept includes, but is not limited to subsequent applicants. Eurostat, Applications (migr_asyapp).

107 Frontex, Risk Analysis for 2019.

108 Frontex, Risk Analysis for 2019.

109 In 2018, the European Commission made a Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Regulation (EC) No 862/2007 of the European Parliament and of the Council on Community statistics on migration and international protection. This fits in the ongoing debate about enhancing and harmonising migration and asylum statistics, for example: ECRE, Comments on the Commission Proposal amending the Migration Statistics Regulation COM(2018) 307; ECRE, Making asylum numbers count.

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